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## Northern Ireland's dinosaur element

Opposition to compensating families of the dead is at odds with the majority pragmatic enough to know peace needs compromise

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[guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), Thursday 29 January 2009 12.43 GMT

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Like fanatical but dazed Japanese infantrymen, emerging from the steaming jungles of the Philippines long after the war was over to find a world at peace, the diehards of the unionist hard right staggered into the function room of the Europa hotel in Belfast yesterday as people sat quietly and prepared to discuss the landmark report into dealing with the legacy of the Troubles.

Catcalling and jeering, the loyalist zealots poured scorn on Lord Eames and Denis Bradley for daring to suggest that wounds can be healed and axes buried. The chief "crime" of the duo who headed the Consultative Group on the Past was that they refused to divide those bereaved in our 30-year dirty war into good victims (pro-British) and bad victims (pro-Irish).

And while the protesters represented no more than the recalcitrant rump of beleaguered unionism, their antics prompted the nervous nellies of the DUP into rejecting the 190-page report before most of them had got past the introduction.

And that's a pity because privately the DUP, happily married in government to Sinn Féin, accepts not only that the war is over but that neither the unionists nor their British masters emerged as victors. And when you've no clear winner in the unhappy business of war, making peace requires compromise – and a thick skin. That's why the families of the 11 nationalists mown down by marauding British soldiers in the Ballymurphy massacre of August 1971 – among them mothers, children and clergy – agreed to swallow hard today and accept that the perpetrators of that slaughter, if subsequently killed in action, are to be treated as equal in death to their loved ones.

And the good news is that, even though their voices weren't heard above the lunchtime *Sturm und Drang* at the Europa, there are thousands of ordinary unionists grieving for their loved ones lost who also want desperately to make peace and move on. To use an Obama-ism, nationalists and unionists who suffered terribly in the years of warfare are extending the hand of friendship to each other even if the serial protesters continue to raise the clenched fist of the past.

Eventually even the most empire-fixated Japanese soldier emerged from his redoubt and went home. On today's evidence, some of our own fanatics are still in that jungle, still digging foxholes.

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